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SIPDIS

FOR NEA/ARP AMACDONALD AND INR SMOFFATT

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KISL](#) [SCUL](#) [YM](#)
SUBJECT: FIGHTING FIRE WITH FIRE: A CLASH OF RELIGIOUS
EXTREMISMS IN SA'ADA

REF: SANAA 708

Classified By: CDA Angie Bryan for reasons 1.4(b) and (d).

11. (S) SUMMARY. One of the deepest root causes of the conflict in Sa'ada is an ongoing battle of religious extremes between the violent Zaydism of the Shiite Houthi rebels native to the region and the radical Sunni Salafism that has crept down from Saudi Arabia in the last 20 years. Supported and encouraged by the government as a check on the influence of the historically powerful Zaydi population, the Salafis have moved into the northern governorates, both sparking and perpetuating the ongoing war in Sa'ada. In the context of a battle for religious dominance between radicalized Shiites and Sunnis, a permanent conclusion to the Sa'ada war is nowhere on the horizon. END SUMMARY.

12. (C) Historically, Yemen's Zaydi Shiites and Shafi Sunnis have had more in common with one another than with the extreme fringes of either sect) the Jafari Shiites of Iran, for example, or Saudi Arabia's Wahabbis. As the Salafis have moved into the Zaydi stronghold of Sa'ada governorate, however, fundamental differences have emerged between the Zaydis and their new Sunni neighbors. "The main principle of Zaydism is rejecting injustice," including the overthrow of an unjust ruler, Zaydi imam Yahya al-Dailami told PolOff in July. Salafism, on the other hand, preaches steadfast obedience to the ruler, with the potential to affect change through quiet counsel. These competing ideologies have clashed in the complex Yemeni political arena, particularly in war-torn Sa'ada. "After unification (in 1990), there was an intense competition between Zaydis and Islah to spread ideology," Dailami said. (Note: Islah, the Islamist opposition party, is generally considered moderate, but contains radical members of the Salafi and Muslim Brotherhood factions. End Note.) Although not party policy, per se, powerful individuals within Islah have made targeting Zaydis a major objective, according to Dailami.

SALAFIS ON THE OFFENSE

13. (S) Fueled by money from the Gulf and a warm reception by the ROYG, the Salafis swept into Yemen in the early 1990s, quickly establishing mosques, madrasas (Quranic schools) and charities across the country (reftel). Widely distributed Salafi propaganda portrays Zaydis as pawns of Iran in a global Shi'a conspiracy that seeks to divide the Muslim world. According to Zaydi contacts, prominent Salafis Mohammed al-Imam in Ma'abar (Dhamar governorate) and Mohammed al-Mahdi in Ibb are the most virulent anti-Zaydi figures today, responsible for spreading discriminatory messages about Shiites among their many followers. The Salafis have significantly increased their presence in President Saleh's home district of Sanhan, a traditionally Zaydi part of Sana'a

governorate, even gaining a number of Zaydi converts. Zaydi human rights activist Ali al-Dailami (brother of Yahya) told PolOff on September 16 that Sanhan is one of the few areas where Salafis have become so dominant, local Zaydis have actually converted to Salafism.

¶4. (C) During the 1990s, Yemen's Salafi leaders tended towards non-violence and quiet support for the government. In recent years, however, they have begun to enter the public political arena. Yahya Ahmad al-Najjar, president of local NGO Social Guidance Institution, founder of the ruling General People's Congress (GPC) Department of Religious Guidance and a former top official at the Ministry of Endowments, said the Salafis have "polluted the environment" and were directly responsible for the al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) terrorist attacks against South Koreans in Hadramout and Sana'a in March. Domestic politics, too, including a perceived "holy war" in Sa'ada, have given the Salafis the opportunity to enter the political arena. Two foreign students killed in March 2007 at the infamous Dar al-Hadith center in Dammaj (Sa'ada governorate) died fighting Houthis on behalf of the ROYG in the fourth round of the Sa'ada conflict, according to local media reports. August 29, 2009, media reports described an armed confrontation between Houthis and Salafis near Dammaj that left 15 dead and five injured. The fighting, which raged for several days, started when Houthis attacked the Salafis who were "taking positions" in a local school. (Note: The ROYG has worked hard to limit information from Sa'ada; these isolated incidents likely represent a larger trend. End Note.)

THE HOUTHIS FIGHT BACK

¶5. (C) In the early 1990s, in the face of what Zaydis perceived as religious persecution, Zaydis in Sa'ada founded a Zaydi revivalist group called the Believing Youth as well as the Zaydi-affiliated al-Haq opposition party. Mohammed Azzan, currently a presidential advisor for Sa'ada affairs and a key founder of both groups, told PolOff in August, "The founding of the Believing Youth was a direct result of the sudden appearance of Salafism in Sa'ada. It was supposed to be a religious renewal for Zaydis, to teach our young people about the Zaydi religion and history. We definitely felt threatened (by the Salafis)." Azzan said that, contrary to rumors, the ROYG did not have a hand in founding the Believing Youth, a branch of which later sprouted the more extreme Houthi ideology and organization. Ali al-Dailami told PolOff that even 20 years later, Zaydis still feel "incredibly threatened" by the rise of Salafism, one reason why the war in Sa'ada is ongoing. Yahya al-Houthi told the International Crisis Group in February 2009, "Our main reason for action is to fight Wahhabism. There has been a cultural and intellectual war between Zaydism and Wahhabism since the revolution in the 1960s."

PLAYING FAVORITES?

¶6. (S) President Saleh and the ROYG have supported and encouraged the spread of Salafism as a politically expedient counterweight to domestic challenges such as southern secessionists and the Houthis. According to Najjar, Minister of Endowments Hamoud al-Hitar sympathizes with the Salafi cause and earmarked one billion riyals (5M USD) of the ministry's 2008 budget for Salafi organizations. Najjar said that the reason he left the ministry was because of its increasing bias towards Salafism. Hitar, however, told PolOff in July that the ministry is attempting to bring thousands of unlicensed, unregulated madrasas (Quranic schools), including Salafi institutions, under government control. (Note: To date, the ministry has focused on Zaydi schools, closing down hundreds since the start of the war in Sa'ada in 2004. End Note.) Hitar said that all of Yemen's religious sects) Shafi, Zaydi, Muslim Brotherhood and Salafi) "should have freedom of opinion without regulation." But in a September 11 interview with al-Jazeera

satellite channel, President Saleh said, "(The Houthis) tell people that they are fighting the Wahabbi faith. We do not have the Wahhabi faith in Yemen." Faris al-Saqqaf, director of local think tank Center for Future Studies, told PolOff on October 6, "The President began the conflict (in Sa'ada) playing with both sides (the Houthis and the Salafis), and now it is out of his control." The Dailamis cited Northwest Regional Commander Brigadier General Ali Muhsin al-Ahmar, thought by some to be the architect of the Sa'ada war, as a "Salafi who is a big problem" for Yemen's Zaydis and often personally replaces Zaydi imams with Salafi clerics.

17. (C) Zaydi contacts say that their community faces ongoing discrimination, exacerbated by the on-again, off-again war in Sa'ada. Yahya al-Dailami described a litany of discriminatory acts over the last five years, including: forced closure of Zaydi mosques and schools; replacement of Zaydi imams with Salafi clerics; and mass arrest campaigns against Zaydi scholars, imams, people with Zaydi-affiliated surnames and al-Haq party members. Zaydi mosques in Sanhan's Beit al-Hadir village and Sana'a's Asir district have been taken over by Salafis and a number of Zaydi imams arrested as a "warning" not to protest. (Note: Yahya al-Dailami, a former imam at a mosque in Sana'a's Old City, was forcibly replaced by an Egyptian Sunni cleric paid by the ROYG. End Note.) National Security Bureau (NSB) and Political Security Organization (PSO) officials commonly monitor Zaydi sermons in Sana'a. Zaydis are still arrested unconstitutionally by the hundreds, according to Ali al-Dailami. These arrests have increased since the start of the Sixth War in Sa'ada in August.

COMMENT

18. (S) The traditional coexistence of Yemen's moderate Shiite and Sunni sects has been rapidly replaced by a quiet battle for domination across the northern governorates and a hot war in Sa'ada. With extensive support from the ROYG and money from the Gulf, Salafis have entrenched themselves in Sa'ada, provoking the creation of the extremist Houthi organization and thereby changing north Yemen's religious landscape. The fierce competition between these radicalized Shiite and Sunni groups - combined with the tribalization of E

the conflict, an IDP population approaching 200,000 across four governorates and a lack of reconstruction between rounds of fighting) guarantees no permanent end to the Sa'ada conflict in the near future. END COMMENT.

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